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Voices from the young learner classrooms: If I were ...

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Abstract

The issues related to teaching and learning process of a foreign language have always been centered on the perceptions of the two parties: the teachers and the teacher trainees. The question of how learners perceive this process is an area which needs to be discovered. The present study attempts to explore the perceptions of young EFL learners regarding the qualities of an effective language teacher as the practitioner of all the theory underlying Teaching English to Young Learners (TEYL). 168 pupils were asked to write an essay responding to an open-ended question. The findings of the study shed light into the process of English Language Teacher Education programs and how young learners as ‘insiders’ have beneficial impact on how language is taught in the classroom.

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1. Introduction

An awareness of the complicated details of the language classrooms is crucial for effective teaching practices (Allwright & Bailey, 1998). To gain this awareness, collaborative exploration of teaching and learning environment by the ‘insiders’, namely teachers and learners, is needed during classroom negotiation. This exploration would both uncover learners’ beliefs about language teaching and learning and launch feedback and thus alternatives for improving actual classroom practices. Thus, the clarification of the ground may affect the way they approach language learning and strategy use.

In related literature, there is a good deal of research that has examined the perceptions of teachers, teacher trainees and occasionally scholars regarding the teaching and learning processes. However, there appears to be a relatively small number of studies which examines learners’ perceptions about the processes. Among those research studies, most are seeking perceptions of learners at undergraduate and/or high school levels. (Cotterall, 1999; Eken, 1999; Arıkan et al., 2008; Shishavan & Sadeghi, 2009). As Chamot and El Dinary (1999) claims metacognitive awareness begins at quite an early stage and therefore young learners (YLS) are capable of providing intricacies of their thinking and learning processes in their courses.

For many years now, theoretical considerations and practices related to teaching English to young learners (TEYL) have been excessively investigated. Above all, there seems to be a crucial point sought investigation, that is to say learners’ preconceived ideas about language learning, beliefs and perceptions about classroom practices, the role of the teacher, teachers’ pedagogical, professional and personal knowledge. On the issue, Joyce and Sougari (2010) reveal that YLS have certain expectations about the procedures in language classrooms and develop a

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concern and dissatisfaction when their expectations are inconsistent with the actual practices of the language teacher. Awareness on the issue enables administrators, teachers, materials writers and even trainers to make some amendments for effective language instructions that would cater for the needs of the majority of the learners. Drawing on the exploration in the related research, the present study aims to find out YLs' perceptions of English language teaching in terms of qualities related to teachers' professional profile (i.e. content knowledge, curriculum, material use, instructional activities, classroom management, teacher talk, teacher's interaction skills and techniques) as well as their personal profile. The following research question constitutes the basis of the present qualitative study:

- E What are YLs' perceptions about the profile of a good English teacher?

2. Method

The present study was designed to investigate YLs' self-reported perspectives on language teaching practices through an open-ended question concerning their views about language teaching in the classroom. The participants were 168 (102 females; 66 males) primary school students enrolled in 4th and 5th grades of 4 different state schools in Bursa, Turkey. Their ages ranged from 10 to 11 years old and they receive three hours of compulsory English language instruction. An open-ended question was utilized to describe YLs' views on language teaching in the classroom. The open-ended question used was: "If you were an English teacher, how would you teach English in the classroom?". The qualitative data were analyzed through content analysis. Categories and subcategories were identified and put under the general categories of a language teacher's professional profile and personal profile. The frequencies were calculated for the subcategories in order to determine the mostly stated views about language teaching in classrooms.

3. Results and discussion

The qualitative findings of the present study were analyzed and categorized through content analysis. Table 1 below illustrates the identified categories and subcategories stated by the YLs participated in the study and their frequencies.

Table 1. frequencies of the subcategories and categories identified

Category	Subcategory	F
Professional profile	Using games	124
	Songs	86
	Visuals	79
	Technology use	63
	Stories	3
	Drama activities	6
	Project-work	24
	Target language use	43
	First language use	32
	Classroom management	37
	Reinforcement and feedback	28
	Teaching strategies	108
	Personal profile	
Personal profile	Personality traits	45
	Behaviors, attitudes	17

As Table 1 illustrates, regarding the professional profile category, the majority of the students (n=124) stated that if they were an English teacher they would use games to teach English in the classroom context. Below are some quotations from the YLs about using games in the classroom.

"I'd use games. If they {the students} have fun while learning, they are more willing [to learn] and want to talk more in the class."

"I'd let them play games about the topic at the end of the lesson."

"I'd teach (English) through games so that I can raise their interest both towards me and the lesson, but I'd do this in an organized manner. If I always make them play games students would say "teacher always uses games", but if I sometimes do this they would say "teacher does this when we do well"."

"I'd teach them through enthusiastic games."

As teaching YLs requires a lot of energy and enthusiasm (Çakır, 2004; Vale & Feunteun, 1995), using games would be appropriate for classroom practices. They involve all the children and they can be suitable for different

learning styles and different personalities. They are also activities which are naturally repetitive, thus maximizing input, frequency of target items without boredom. A teacher can play a simple guessing game numerous times with children although it includes limited language (e.g. “Is it a ...?”). The students will happily repeat the structure without getting bored as it is part of a game and has a real communicative function (Ioannou-Georgiou, 2010). Moreover, the participants state their need for learning English through playing games. Carmen (1992) indicates being aware of YLs’ needs and interests can enrich the quality of teaching in YLs’ classes. Additionally, Yolageldili and Arıkan (2011) also mention about the advantage that games stimulate students’ interest in classroom activities and motivate them and students become willing to learn. Students’ anxiety towards language learning can be minimized through the use of games in the YL classroom, which is another advantage of games.

With regard to the YLs’ views about using songs in the classroom, 86 students wrote that they would use songs to teach English in the classroom, which is essential that YLs’ should be provided with a variety of activities and tasks (Dunn, 1989). As songs can be used to teach all aspects of foreign language, the language teachers can take advantage of using songs in that they provide variety in the class routine and are enjoyable and relaxing especially for YLs (Kömür, Saraç & Şeker, 2005; Millington, 2011). As Millington (2011) states:

This variety stimulates interest and attention, which can help maintain classroom motivation, thereby helping learners to reach higher levels of achievement. Secondly, songs, in particular choral singing, can help to create a relaxed and informal atmosphere that makes the classroom a nonthreatening environment. By reducing anxiety, songs can help increase student interest and motivate them to learn the target language. Students often think of songs as entertainment rather than study and therefore find learning English through songs fun and enjoyable. (p.136)

As the third and fourth subcategories for professional profile category, “using visuals” and “technology use” were identified. Nearly half of the students (n=79) mentioned that they would use visuals (e.g. pictures, flashcards, films, cartoons, colored books, puppets, and posters) and technological tools (n=63) in classrooms while teaching English.

“I’d show them pictures, slides, have them watch films, cartoon strips in English.”

“I’d use pictured worksheets and books.”

“I’d use the board and draw pictures in order for my students to understand what I’ve taught.”

“I’d teach by using Internet because there is a lot of information there.”

This view of the participants supports that learning can be more meaningful, memorable and more motivating as well as interesting when teachers of YLs’ utilize visual aids in classrooms (Celce-Murcia & Hilles, 1988, in Yıldırım & Doğan, 2010). While teaching young pupils the use of visuals, such as puppets, toys and real objects, to give them the chance to touch and manipulate things is a very effective tool, and it is advantageous to use picture stories, cartoons and comic strips (Wright, 1974).

Using drama and stories for language teaching in the classroom were also indicated by the students (n=6). It is so obvious that the number of learners who offered these techniques for teaching English in the classroom. This may be the consequence of their previous experiences in the language classrooms as most of the language teachers in Turkey use traditional methods for language teaching to YLs.

Participants also stated their views about assessment. As the seventh category indicated, 24 of the students would use project work to assess their students’ performance as a language learner. In contrast, some of the learners (n=8) proposed to frequently administer pen-and-paper exams or quizzes in their language teaching practice.

“I’d give them performance-based tasks in order to understand what they couldn’t understand.”

“I’d tell them to prepare projects.”

“I’d prepare exams for them every week.”

These findings seem to suggest that some of the students are not exposed to the appropriate assessment for YLs. However, as the students suggested project work for assessment, it can be concluded that they have metacognitive awareness that they should be assessed through long-term tasks which will decrease their anxiety levels as they are not tested in a short time and through an intrusive way. In an activity mode they can frequently be assessed as to understanding and production (Bouma, 2005). Observing samples of learners’ real use of language, engaging learners in purposeful language use in a specific situation such as a classroom learning activity, making learners active participants of the lesson, or Including both processes and products of the students as in Project work are ways of assessment for YLs. These will provide multiple sources of evidence over time in order to increase the

reliability and validity of the evaluation of learners' progress. In, sum, "children need time to learn and enjoy their study in a safe, nurturing and anxiety-free environment." (McKay, 2006, p. 144).

Another subcategory for professional profile category was the use of L1 and L2 in the classroom, the findings revealed that 43 respondent students wanted to use the target language in the classroom, whereas 32 of them wished to speak Turkish while teaching especially when students had difficulty in understanding, which may be a reflection of their previous classroom experiences. Some teachers of English do not use the various techniques suggested in the literature appropriate for teaching English to YLs such as using visuals gestures, puppets, or realia, therefore they prefer using the mother tongue for giving instructions, vocabulary teaching, making explanations, etc. Using the mother tongue is not recommended by the literature as Moon (2000, p. 62) states "the use of English in the classroom can increase the motivation of the students" and this will provide exposure to YLs which is a necessity that cannot be provided frequently in foreign language environments.

"I'd always speak English. When they do not understand me, I'd use gestures and mimics."

"I'd learn English well and speak fluently in the classroom."

"Firstly I'd speak English. When they do not understand me, I'd say it in Turkish."

"I'd teach vocabulary by telling their Turkish equivalents."

"I'd say everything [instructions, explanations] in Turkish."

With regard to the classroom management and interaction, promoting active participation, creating a relaxed classroom atmosphere, establishing classroom rules and using their names.

"I'd teach them the classroom rules."

"Using their names is important, because they like this."

Reinforcement and feedback is another category found in the views of the YLs participated (n=28). Quotations of students revealed their awareness about reinforcement and feedback in the classroom. Some of their ideas are as follows:

"I wouldn't break their hearts when they make mistakes."

"I'd give them presents (chocolate in winter, ice-cream in summer) when they are successful."

"When they make mistakes, I'd give them clues."

As it can be understood from the quotations, students do not want to be punished and they want positive reinforcement and constructive feedback when they make mistakes in the classroom. If importance is given to feedback, YLs, who are more dependent to their teachers, will be able to understand the essence of feedback and expect its provision by their teachers (Joyce & Sougari, 2010). Furthermore, as teachers give constructive feedback, teachers can create a stress-free environment and they can facilitate participation in the classroom, which is a very important component of language learning process, particularly for YLs.

The last subcategory of a YL English teacher's profile is "teaching strategies". This subcategory included various teaching strategies (n=108) employed by teachers in the classroom such as board use, asking questions, facilitating note-taking, revision of topics, giving extra exercises, paraphrasing, etc.

The second category identified in the present study was the "personal profile" of the teacher. The personality traits stated were being tolerant, compassionate, praising, thoughtful, patient, self-sacrificing, empathizing, cheerful and caring.

"I'd let them eat or drink something in the classroom."

"After the lessons in my spare time I'd teach the students who cannot succeed in the exams."

"I wouldn't get angry with them, if I do so, they don't love me."

"I'd try to understand my students' feelings."

"It is important to me that my students love me."

The above results indicate that YLs of English value and expect similar personality traits in teachers regardless of differences in their classroom experiences or grade level. In general, this views are consistent with developmental psychologists' and motivation theorists' descriptions of teacher qualities that meet students' psychological needs for relatedness and opportunities for mastery learning (McCombs & Whisler, 1997; Ryan & Stiller, 1991, in Daniels et al., 2001). Research also shows that if young children are enrolled in developmentally-appropriate programs, they will not only have low anxiety levels but their motivation will also be higher and they will be more successful learners (Charlesworth, et al., 1993; Stipek et al., 1995).

4. Conclusion

The purpose of the present study was to specify the professional and personal profiles of teachers of young English language learners from the students' perspectives. A total of 168 4th and 5th grade primary school students were requested to write their views responding an open-ended question asking how they would teach English in the classroom if they were an English teacher. The views of the learners were investigated in order to throw a light on the YLs needs and expectations while they are on their way of learning English as a complex process.

As metacognitive awareness begins at quite an early stage, YLs are capable of providing intricacies of their thinking and learning processes in their courses (Chamot & El Dinary, 1999). The views of YLs related to teaching practices in the classroom will provide invaluable feedback for the administrators, teachers, materials writers, and especially teacher trainers and teacher training curriculum developers to revise and refine professional and personal profiles and competencies of current and future language teachers.

One of the important outcomes of the present study is that YLs think-possibly expect- their teachers use games, songs, visuals and technology during their classroom practices. They want to be assessed mainly by alternative assessment techniques rather than intrusive and anxiety provoking pen-and-paper exams which do not pertain to YL classes. Additionally, most of the learners stated that they would use the target language, whereas some of them contrast this, which implicitly conveys the message that their teachers lack of professional knowledge about the importance of target language use in the YL classroom (Moon, 2000). For personality traits, learners reflect their social and emotional needs (e.g. their teachers' being tolerant, compassionate, praising, thoughtful, patient, self-sacrificing, empathizing, cheerful and caring) which, in turn, may help learners to develop positive attitudes towards language learning, the school, teachers and learning in general.

In sum, the more we learn about YLs' awareness of classroom practices and attitudes toward learning, the more importance would be given to find ways to hear their voices. Thus, the practices that can change and develop their language learning motivations and attitudes can become the focus of our attention to increase the quality of teaching YLs in Turkey as teacher trainers, curriculum developers, materials designers and practitioner teachers.

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